

## Friedrich Nerly's VENICE – an Invention of the Romantic Era



Friedrich Nerly, *Piazzetta in Venice by Moonlight*, 1849, private collection

During his four-decade-long creative period in the lagoon city, the German landscape painter **FRIEDRICH NERLY** (1807–1878) attained international recognition. Thanks to his excellently connected teacher, the art theorist and educator Carl Friedrich von Rumohr, he was thoroughly familiar with German Romanticism and carried it with him, so to speak in his luggage, across the Alps to Italy.

With his innovative, emotionally intense paintings of Venice, Nerly expanded the Venetian pictorial canon and, venturing beyond the historic city centre on his excursions, brought back breathtaking sunsets from the lagoon. But Nerly owed his fame at the time to no other artistic invention as profoundly as to his Venetian moonlight paintings. His most famous painting, *The Piazzetta in Venice by Moonlight*, even became an early international success, which he replicated in 36 versions. Nerly's iconic moonlight paintings not only mark the beginning of Venice's nocturnal transformation, but ultimately also demonstrate that our present-day image of the city on the water is essentially a creation of the Romantic Era. Nevertheless, his name has been forgotten in Venice, as have his artistic achievements in creating a new image of the city. None of his moonlight paintings, which once made him the most successful foreign artist in Venice, is now held in any public Venetian collection.

A long-term research project on Nerly's Venetian creative period in association with the Deutsches Studienzentrum in Venice is intended to counteract this oblivion, first with an interdisciplinary conference dedicated to **NIGHT IN VENICE** in October 2025, to be followed in 2027 by the international exhibition project **INVENTING VENICE – Friedrich Nerly and Ippoliti Caffi**.

## CONFERENCE 2025–2026

### NIGHT IN VENICE – Self-perception and perception by others in 19<sup>th</sup>-century painting, music and literature

Following a research project in Erfurt, which culminated in the exhibition *Friedrich Nerly – From Erfurt to the World* (Erfurt, Angermuseum, 2021–2025), Nerly's creative period in Venice was re-examined in the course of a fellowship at the Deutsches Studienzentrum (German Study Centre) in Venice. Proceeding from Nerly's iconic invention of the Venetian moonlit night, the interdisciplinary conference *NIGHT IN VENICE – Self-perception and perception by others in painting, music and literature in the 19<sup>th</sup> century* was organized:

Organizer: Deutsches Studienzentrum, Venice, 14–16 October 2025

Concert Alla Luna: Conservatorio Benedetto Marcello (Palazzo Pisani a Santo Stefano)

Concept and organization: Dr. Claudia Denk, Research Fellow, Deutsches Studienzentrum in Venedig; Privatdozent Dr. Richard Erkens, Director of the Deutsches Studienzentrum; and Prof. Dr. Barbara Kuhn, Chairwoman of the Deutsches Studienzentrum

External funding: Fritz Thyssen Stiftung für Wissenschaftsförderung and Ernst von Siemens Kunststiftung

Publication in preparation: *Venetiana* series of the Deutsches Studienzentrum, expected publication date autumn 2026

## EXHIBITION 2026–2027

### INVENTING VENICE – Friedrich Nerly and Ippolito Caffi



Friedrich Nerly, *San Michele di Murano*, 1849, SPSG, Schloss Charlottenburg

For the first time Nerly's views of Venice will be brought back to the place where they were created by the international exhibition project *INVENTING VENICE – Friedrich Nerly and Ippolito Caffi*. The exhibition will be on display from 19 March to 6 June 2027 at the **Ca' Pesaro – Galleria internazionale d'Arte moderna** in Venice, and subsequently from 18 July to 7 November 2027 in an expanded form at **the Museum Georg Schäfer** in Schweinfurt. The two venues will each have a different focus. After almost 200 years, the first venue will enable visitors to view Nerly's impressive Venice paintings from major German and Italian museums and private collections in the historic setting of Venice, alongside the work of his Venetian

contemporary Ippolito Caffi from the artist's estate at the Ca' Pesaro. The second venue in Schweinfurt will further complement his Venetian oeuvre with additional key works and place it within the context of German Romanticism. At the same time, Nerly's as well as Caffi's spectacular Venetian views will be juxtaposed with the more realistic depiction of the city by the early photographers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century from the Neue Pinakothek in Munich.



Ippolito Caffi, *View of the Piazzetta and the Church of Santa Maria della Salute (Il Molo)*, 1859  
Venice, Ca' Pesaro



Carlo Naya, *View from St. Mark's Square across the Bacino di San Marco to the island of San Giorgio Maggiore*, c. 1865, Munich, Neue Pinakothek

The exhibition will thus offer far more than a rediscovery of the once-famous German artist who made Venice his home for many years, alongside his eminent Venetian contemporary. On the one hand, it will bring to life a complex portrait of a city, displaying the differing perceptual outlooks of the two Romantics and also the perspectives of the technologically adept contemporaneous photographers. On the other hand, the exhibition will show that it was Nerly, as a German Romantic, who succeeded in reinventing the city on the water as a timeless place of longing thanks to his perspective as an outsider, and in shaping an image of Venice that remains valid to this day.

*The exhibition will feature over 100 works – including paintings, drawings, and photographs, as well as albums and travel guides.*

Curator and Project Manager: Dr. Claudia Denk (idea and concept)

Partners / Co-curators: Dott.ssa Elisabetta Barizoni, Dirigente Area Musei / Ca' Pesaro – Galleria Internazionale d'Arte Moderna e Museo Fortuny, Dirigente Responsabile MUVE a Mestre and Dr. Ulf Dingerdissen, Deputy Director, Curator of 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Art, Georg Schäfer Museum

Further partners: Deutsches Studienzentrum in Venedig; Prof. Dr. Barbara Kuhn, Chair; Privatdozent Dr. Richard Erkens, Director; and Petra Schaefer, M.A.

External funding: Ernst von Siemens Kunststiftung, Tavolozza Foundation and Kythera Kultur-Stiftung

Exhibition catalogue: An opulently illustrated catalogue with scholarly essays by the curators is due to be published in German, Italian and English, by Deutscher Kunstverlag.

**First venue: Ca' Pesaro – Galleria internazionale d'Arte moderna (19 March to 6 June 2027)**

Both Nerly and Caffi can be associated with the renewal of Venetian veduta painting – the French writer and art critic Théophile Gautier spoke of a veritable 'innovation' in response to Caffi's strikingly new views of Venice in the snow and at night at the 1855 Paris World's Fair. Both followed the new ideal of the landscape painter as a travelling artist and, independently of one another, brought the then emerging plein-air painting to Venice. At the same time, they both turned their attention to the hitherto unknown Venetian night scene: the German discovered the night in quiet romanticization, whilst the Italian found spectacular explosions of colour in the fireworks of traditional Venetian night-time festivals.



Ippolito Caffi, *Venice in the Snow*, Trieste, Civico Museo Revoltella

By bringing together Friedrich Nerly's paintings of Venice with the work of the Venetian 'painter patriot' Ippolito Caffi, the exhibition aims to gain a better understanding of these innovative artistic developments in terms of a '*histoire croisée*'. To this end, it is also necessary to bear in mind the political and artistic forces at play at the time, which shaped Venice between the two major movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – the formation of nation states and the dawn of globalisation. In Nerly's time, Venice was a city largely under foreign rule, a status that began with the occupation by Napoleonic troops in 1797 and continued under the

subsequent Austrian occupation. Deprived of its former political influence, Venice flourished anew in a different way and, in the context of the emerging international culture of travel and the up-coming tourism era, developed into a world-renowned city, a destination for travellers and foreigners. At the same time, its political, economic and intellectual climate was shaped by the Risorgimento. It participated in the complex processes and political unrest that ultimately led to the founding of the Italian nation-state.

As an immigrant, Friedrich Nerly benefited from his outsider's perspective and the fact that for decades Venice was part of the geographically vast Habsburg Empire. In contrast, Ippolito Caffi, who was born in Veneto, took the role of the local patriot. Whilst Nerly brought the "enchanted moonlit night" (Ludwig Tieck) of German Romanticism to Venice, Caffi approached the subject from a different angle. In 1848–49, Venice attained the status of an independent republic (Repubblica di San Marco) for a year and a half, before joining the Kingdom of Italy, founded in 1861, in 1866. Accordingly, Caffi developed his nocturnal images on the basis of the Venetian festive tradition or deliberately gave the night a patriotic touch by depicting the night-time bombardment of the Marghera fortress by Austrian troops, an event which was soon followed by the fall of the republic.



Ippolito Caffi, *Bombardment of Marghera on the Night of May 25 1849*, Venedig, Ca' Pesaro

### **Second venue: Museum Georg Schäfer (Schweinfurt, 18 July to 7 November 2027)**

No one better illustrates the influence of German Romanticism on a new image of Venice than Friedrich Nerly, who was the first to cast the moon's magical light on the city. His artistic origins will therefore be a particular focus at the second venue, the Georg Schäfer Museum. It is a stroke of good fortune that Nerly's spectacular night scenes can enter into a direct, instructive dialogue there with the moonlight scenes by Caspar David Friedrich, Johan Christian Dahl and Carl Gustav Carus.



Johan Christian Dahl, *Kronborg Castle by Moonlight*, 1833, Schweinfurt, Museum Georg Schäfer

Furthermore, in Schweinfurt, the contemporaneous photographs of Venice by Domenico Bresolin and Carlo Naya, as well as those by the German photographer Giorgio Sommer – who worked in the lagoon city for a time – will open up further perspectives. On the one hand, Nerly experimented at a very early stage with the possibilities of photography for reproducing his pictures. On the other hand, an exemplary selection from the noteworthy collection of Dietmar Siegert at the Neue Pinakothek in Munich (on loan from the Ernst von Siemens Kunststiftung) will bring the lagoon city to life in this more realistic medium and showcase the visual worlds of Nerly and Caffi against the backdrop of the changing historical cityscape.



Carlo Naya, *View of St. Mark's Square from San Giorgio Maggiore (moonlight effect)*, before 1868  
Munich, Neue Pinakothek

Unlike Caffi, but above all unlike his contemporary photographers, Nerly deliberately excluded the disruptions due to warfare as well as the incursions of the latest technical inventions. His selective perception of the city also shaped his *Piazzetta in Venice by Moonlight*, painted in many variations over three decades. In his moonlight paintings, neither the cannons positioned as a precaution beneath the arcades of the Doge's Palace – intended to secure

Austrian rule – nor the large steamships in St. Mark’s Basin nor the towering gas lamps with their bright glow are to be seen. Above all, Nerly’s views, which at first glance appear realistic, will, on closer inspection, prove to be evocative images of longing, detached from their time.



Friedrich Nerly, *View of St. Mark's Basin with Santa Maria della Salute by moonlight*, 1850, Trieste, Civico Museo Morpurgo

The exhibition promises a multifaceted and complex picture of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Venice and, above all, will make it clear that our modern image of Venice is essentially a creation of the Romantic era.

### Illustrations

**Friedrich Nerly:** *Piazzetta in Venice by Moonlight*, 1849, oil on canvas, 64.5 x 88.0 cm, private collection; *San Michele di Murano*, 1849, oil on canvas, 110.50 x 173.50 cm, SPSG, Schloss Charlottenburg, inv. no. GK I 4437, from: *Friedrich Nerly – Von Erfurt in die Welt. Die Gemälde und Ölstudien des Nerly-Bestandes im Angermuseum Erfurt*, ed. by C. Denk, K. U. Schierz, T. v. Taschitzki, Berlin and Munich 2024, p. 263, cat. no. 19a.2 and p. 39, fig. 3; and *View of St. Mark's Basin with Santa Maria della Salute by moonlight*, 1850, oil on canvas, 75 x 103 cm, Trieste, Civico Museo Morpurgo, inv. no. 3024. – **Ippolito Caffi:** *Venice in the Snow*, oil on canvas, 44 x 63 cm, Civico Museo Revoltella, Trieste, inv. no. 2585, *View of the Piazzetta and the Church of Santa Maria della Salute (Il Molo)*, 1869, oil on carton, 55.5 x 90 cm, Venice, Ca' Pesaro, inv. no. 1746/ Cl. 1 n. 1491; and *Bombardment of Marghera on the Night of 25 May 1849*, oil on wood, 25 x 43 cm, Ca' Pesaro, inv. no. 4515 / Cl. 1 n. 1606, from: *Ippolito Caffi. Tra Venezia a l'Oriente. 1809–1866. La collezione die Musei Civici di Venezia*, a cura di Annalisa Scarpa (exh. cat. Museo Correr 28 May to 20 Nov. 2026), Venice 2016, Cat. 20 and 10. – **Carlo Naya:** *View from St. Mark's Square toward the Island of San Giorgio Maggiore*, c. 1865, albumen paper, 27 x 35.5 cm and *View of St. Mark's Square from San Giorgio Maggiore (moonlight effect)*, before 1868, albumen print, blue-tinted, 26.8 x 35 cm, Neue Pinakothek, D. Siebert Collection, inv. nos. DS 1674 and DS 1684 (23 April 2026). – **Johan Christian Dahl, Kronborg Castle in Moonlight, 1833, oil on canvas, 34.5 x 48 cm, Museum Georg Schäfer, Schweinfurt, inv. no. MGS 2630**